

A Sheep's Eye View sermon series
#2 – Green Pastures and Still Waters
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We continue our study of Psalm 23 today by focusing on the section that starts, “He lets me rest in the meadow grass.” Other translations say, “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” Green pastures. I remember those. Thankfully, there’s no line in here that says, “He makes me lie down and make snow angels, he leads me beside salt-spraying snowplows.”

The section we are looking at today has a theme running through it. It’s the idea of moving, or more accurately, being led. The NIV version of this psalm says, “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” Makes me lie down, leads, guides.

Here’s an interesting difference between cows and sheep. If you want to get cows to go anywhere, you have to get behind them and push – and watch where you step. Cows have to be herded in order to be moved. But not sheep. For a sheep to go anywhere, it must be led. Sheep are followers. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else – like their shepherd – has not gone first and shown them everything is all right.

Here’s an interesting point about the idea of a sheep being made to lie down. Sheep are very skittish animals. They’re high-maintenance Nervous Nellies. They have to reach a high level of comfort before they can relax. You can’t just point and say, “Fluffy, lie down!” They have to be free from fear, tension, aggravation, and hunger, all of which can be eliminated through the hard work of the shepherd.

How often do we get to just lie down, free from fear, tension, aggravation and hunger? In our Elders group last week, the question was asked, “What’s your favorite time of day?” Several of the Elders responded, “When everybody is gone from the house!” For me, it’s after our girls are in bed, and I can begin to unwind from the day. We crave and savor those precious moments of quietness, when our minds can rest from the daily fears and tensions.

But how often do we intentionally rest this way? Based on the rate of heart attacks and stress-related illnesses in our country, I’d say not enough. Notice what the NIV translation says: “He *makes* me lie down in green pastures.” Sometimes I wonder if the detours in our lives are God’s way of making us lie down and rest. When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, I was in the middle of my final semester in seminary and looking for my first job. I was emotionally drained and physically exhausted. And for five days, I had to lie down in a hospital bed, and I received incredible love and support from my wife and family, my friends, and my church. For my soul, that hospital bed was indeed a green pasture. Where are your green pastures in life? Where do you go to be restored? I found out that it’s better to choose to lie down than for your God-created body to make you lie down.

Here’s another thing about sheep you may not know: Sheep don’t like change. Sound like anyone you know? Sheep will stay in one place and graze and graze and graze there until all the grass is gone, unless someone leads them to greener pastures. Unless someone shows them there’s a better place, they’ll stay put.

When I was growing up, we had a wonderful Chesapeake Bay retriever named Beau. He was an awesome dog, but he had a nasty habit of drinking out of the toilets. Even if his water dish was completely full, if he walked by the bathroom he be like, “Hey, open bar!” I would call his name and lead him to his water bowl, and he’d look at me like, “Wow! Who put this here? This is great!”

Like Beau and like sheep, I wonder if often times we don’t settle for something because we think it’s the best thing available. If sheep don’t drink from pure water, they end up drinking from polluted water and picking up all kinds of internal parasites and disease. But they drink it anyway, because they think it’s the best water they can get. Beau drank from the toilet because he thought it was the only water available, until I showed him something better.

In our lives, we are hungry and thirsty for things beyond food and drink: we’re hungry and thirsty for meaning, for purpose, for fulfillment. W. Phillip Keller says in his book, “All the long and complex history of earth’s religions, pagan worship, and human philosophy is bound up with an insatiable thirst for God.” But too often we drink from polluted water to try and satisfy our need for fulfillment, without realizing that something much purer has been offered: the Living Water of Jesus Christ. In this psalm, David encourages us to look at our lives and the sources from which we satisfy our hunger and quench our thirst.

It is through the leading of our shepherd that we find the pastures and the water, the food and the drink we need to survive. And when life becomes treacherous, the psalmist reminds us that the shepherd restores our soul. Keller talks about a problem he often dealt with in his flock called a cast down sheep. Do you know what this is? This is when a sheep gets turned over on its back and can’t get up. As I age I’m beginning to resemble a sheep in that way, as well.

This was a serious threat to a sheep. If it lay there long enough, its intestinal gases would build up and it would die. The shepherd would have to find the sheep before predators found it, turn it upright, and rubs its limbs to get the blood flowing again.

How often in our lives do we feel cast down, like our lives have been turned over and we can’t get up? Sometimes we are tripped up by the circumstances of life, and sometimes we trip ourselves up. Some people think that when a follower of God falls, God becomes frustrated, fed up, even angry. But the picture painted here is that God runs to our side, wanting to help us up and restore us to balance.

A danger we face is that aren’t always aware of how easily we could become cast down. One of the major causes of overturned sheep is the sheep would stand for a long time on a soft patch of ground, its weight settling into the grass, and when it shifted its body to move, it would tumble.

There’s a word here about the importance of moving. When we stand in one place for too long, when we reside in the comfortable position, we are more susceptible to falling. Paul says this to the affluent Corinthian church: “If you think you are standing firm, be careful you don’t fall!” Because we sheep don’t like change, we’re vulnerable to entrenching ourselves in a certain way of thinking or living that can easily become destructive, or at least contrary to who God has called us to be.

Keller says that the greatest single safeguard a shepherd has in keeping his flock safe is to keep them on the move, helping them find green pastures, leading them to fresh

water, keeping them from settling too long in one place. Sheep are notorious creatures of habit, and if they are left to their own devices, they will literally idle themselves to death.

The Christian life is not a stagnant life. It is a life ever on the move. This doesn't mean geographically, although that's true for some. It means a constant desire to grow, to learn, to seek new pastures and find new paths. Jesus says in John's gospel, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In fact, early Christians were called followers of The Way. Not The Rest Stop or the Loitering Place. The Way. Leading, guiding, and following all imply movement.

Here's the thing: I am often my own worst speed bump, because I don't want to follow. I don't want to be led by someone, even if it's down a path of righteousness. Why? Because who knows what's best for me? Me! Nobody knows me like me, and nobody can make decisions for me like me, so nobody can lead me but me.

The problem is, such thinking will often have us drinking out of the toilet. We think we know best, because we're humans and that's what we do, when in fact there is someone who knows us even better than we know ourselves, and he calls us to follow him down paths of righteousness to honor his name.

Lent is the perfect time for us to look at the paths we are following and ask if those paths lead to God's glory, or someone else's, or our own. God knows where to find the green pastures and the still waters, God knows how to restore the traffic jam that has become our souls, God calls us to follow him down paths that bring honor and glory to him. But like every journey, this movement starts with a single step, and that step is our willingness to let go of our own pretension and be led. Thanks be to Jesus, who has shown us the way. May he grant us the courage and the strength to get up and follow.